

Life and Marriage

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Introduction – Why Bother?

There are many people writing books, giving seminars, and providing counseling about marriage and relationships. What could I possibly add that would make it worthwhile for someone else to notice? Good question.

One big life lesson I have learned and continue to learn is how little I know. Extensive research and training in this area are not among my credentials. My qualifications are few, simple, and sincere:

- my own life experience,
- my own painful journey through marriage and divorce,
- my desire to help anyone willing to listen to have a better journey, and to avoid the devastation that can come from a troubled marriage and divorce.

It just may be that someone, perhaps you, who is struggling in a relationship can identify and relate with my experience, and can know that the ideas here come from someone who perhaps can connect with your experience and your feelings, having been there. This also provides valuable information for marriage improvement that will help avoid ever being able to relate to an experience like mine.

Where I've Been : Deeply Troubled

There was a time when I felt so burdened, so lost and so hopeless in my marriage that I may have been relieved, if not pleased had my wife divorced me or even had she perished. I am absolutely grieved and ashamed that I ever felt that way, but I did. At the time I could not see how we could survive together for the rest of our lives. At one point, I felt so trapped, so oppressed, so lost and hopeless in the marriage that I despaired of life and wanted to die rather than live that way. There were times when I went to my knees to pray about it, but all I could do was cry.

I read dozens of books, went to many seminars, and spent years and tens of thousands of dollars in counseling. Yet it just seemed to get worse. I felt like an animal in a trap willing to chew my leg off to get out of it. It was absolutely horrible and the struggle and weight of this negative world pervaded my being and consumed my thoughts and directions. A simple kind word from any woman such as “You're a good man” or “I enjoy you” felt like a treasure to be cherished and could lead to imagining pots of gold at the end of a rainbow in fantasy scenarios that took me to happier places where I was appreciated and life was reasonable. Yet these are illusions, mirages in the desert. Pursuit of them will leave you dying of the very thirst you were trying to quench. I had sincerely tried very hard, but nothing seemed to work. It was *so* painful. I was *so* tired. *What* could I do???

My Transformation

Finally I created a mission for my marriage, and began to follow it mostly out of willpower and obligation [and even a sub-desire to just be done with it.]. Together with prayer and fasting, this actually transformed me and I became excited about my marriage, about my wife – what had previously seemed absolutely impossible.

Later I read about a case where the husband decided to do everything the wife wanted. After a year, he was transformed, but she was still miserable. In the outstanding movie *Fireproof*, they say “***Don’t just follow your heart, lead your heart.***” That is what you must do. If you don’t, you’ll wish you had.

My story does not have a happy ending in terms of my marriage. My wife ultimately chose someone else over me, over her family, and over God, and I have endured the greatest evil, the greatest shame, and the greatest grief of my lifetime. However, my story continues, and even so, it is also a story of God’s goodness and his grace. The grace and love and support from my church and family and friends very much helped me survive and showed me Jesus. Though I am a mess, I am a loved mess. The bitter awful experience has taught me a great deal. The price is high for these lessons, and both the cost and the learning continues. Since I've already paid for them, I hope to save you the cost of first-hand lessons by sharing what I have learned.

What Do You Know?

I Cor 8:2 says if a man thinks he knows something, then he doesn't yet know as he ought to know. Many evils occur, even with good intentions, because of ignorance, especially when we're convinced we actually know something. There is great danger to your relationships if you're not open to things that are outside of your experience, and the possibility that what you think you know simply isn't true. We assume far more than we really know.

Some of the ideas that I am sharing will be difficult to accept. They were for me. You may struggle with them, but make it an honest struggle and keep your goal in mind. It is ironic that to find truth we need to let go of our need to be right. Beware of assumptions and arrogance that blind us to the truth, and parading instead impostors of our own making.

Chew on the ideas presented here. Challenge them. Sit with them. Feel them. Truth resonates, even when we don't like it or reject it. Falseness rings hollow, no matter how much we want to believe it is true. Seek and knock. May this open doors to a wonderful world better than you have ever imagined.

Not Perfect

- The perfectionist in me wants to wait until things are all polished, complete, and right before letting them out, or to wait until I have time to get it right before even starting. For this reason it has taken me a long time to make this work on marriage available, and it would take me a longer time to get it close to what I want. However, because of what is at stake, I believe it is more important to make it available than to have it “right”. Something is better than nothing. So this is available in its current form, incomplete and rather disorganized with the hope that it will still be valuable and useful, making a positive difference in relationships. Feedback, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Updates may take weeks or months, but are intended as I refine and organize. Meanwhile I intend to respond quickly to any pressing relationship questions if asked.

You Are Half the Problem

- Marriage/relationship problems are 50 / 50.
 - Whoa! That's a tough one to swallow, isn't it? Yet it is true (excluding adultery, and arguably a few other “biggies”).
 - Every relationship reaches equilibrium. If you change, so does your relationship. If your spouse has a problem, then you have an equivalent one, whether it is your response to the other's problem or another problem.
 - We have equal amounts of pain from childhood, equal dysfunction, equal unawareness, immaturity... The manifestations may be different, but the
 - *One of the biggest problems you can have is to think that the other person is the problem in the relationship.*
 - The sooner you can accept these truths in your relationship, the sooner it will start improving.
 - If these things weren't true, then second marriages would be more successful than firsts. Yet they are at least 20% more likely to fail. That's because we take our problems, fantasies, and lack of commitment with us.

You Are Half the Problem (Cont.)

- Marriage/relationship problems are 50 / 50. (Examples)
 - Example: One spouse is domineering and apparently selfish while the other meeker (not weaker) one tries valiantly to be submissive to God, to do the Christian thing by forgiving, overlooking the other's behavior, trying to be nice and follow the golden rule. This is a problem with boundaries. The domineer doesn't respect the other's boundaries, or really that person. Neither does that other person. The domineer may take without asking, demand rather than request, talk down to the spouse, discount the partner when talking to others. Clearly this isn't right and it might seem that this person is the problem: If only the domineer would shape up, the relationship would get better. Yet it is also true that if the spouse would shape up, the relationship would get better. The meeker behavior is half the problem, rewarding the domineer's poor behavior instead of exercising boundaries (which have consequences) that would improve the relationship for both of them. The meeker behavior may seem more noble because it seems nicer and more respectful, but it is still half the problem. The truth is, it doesn't have adequate respect. That doesn't seem right and it doesn't seem fair, because all would be ok if only everyone showed proper respect and consideration. That's not the real world and the truth is that we are each responsible for ourselves. We need to learn to be nice to and respect ourselves just as we do others.
 - Other examples: A boy has a car which the parents pay for. He goes through three sets of tires in one year. His problem: inconsideration and aggressive driving. The parent's problem: Taking the consequences that belong to the son. If he were paying for his own tires, chances are he'd be more careful with them, and learn better stewardship and fiscal management. It doesn't always seem like it but it is often the loving thing to do to let others suffer their own consequences, rather than rescue them. The Bible says if you rescue a hot-headed man, you will have to do it again.

Expect: The Worst

- Expectations Destroy Relationships
 - Example: One partner “expects” acknowledgment or gifts for special occasions, such as a birthday. The person gets angry and upset if they don't get this. In that case, no one can give them a gift, only meet an obligation. Alternatively, if a person gives a gift with expectations about how it will be used, then it has strings attached and is not a gift, but just another obligation.
 - “Expectation” here is a critical measure, rather than an anticipation. Such an expectation is a negative pressure and opportunity to fail; it comes with judgment. It's ok to hope for something and be disappointed when you don't get it, but to expect something, such as a birthday gift, is to treat someone like they owe you something. No one can give a gift by paying a debt.
 - The less expectation, the less pressure, the happier the person and the relationship.
 - Gratitude is the answer to this and many problems.

Nuggets

- If the grass looks greener elsewhere, it's likely because you're not watering your own. (And manure is good fertilizer.)
- If you don't work out your issues in your current relationships, you'll have to do it in the next one. It will just take longer.
- We marry our issues – usually someone rather like one of our parents. If we divorce and marry someone else, we will almost certainly have the same issues because we are the same person. We grow up with certain strategies of coping to survive childhood. Then we find another hand to fit that glove we created. Substantial personal change can reduce this, but never remove it.
- 90% of divorced people surveyed would stay in their first marriage if they had it do over again. [Reference Study here]
- Divorce doesn't solve problems. It just rearranges them.
- Nearly 70% of the issues in a marriage are unresolvable. [John Gottman] This will not improve in another relationship.
- Every marriage has around 10 major issues. [John Gottman]
- Life brings *you* the problems you need to fix about *yourself* what needs fixing. [Mort Fertel, Marriage Fitness]
- Only behavior that is rewarded will continue.
- Soul mates are not found, they're made.
- If you have good boundaries, your relationship will improve or else the other person will choose to leave.

- **Connection** is perhaps the most important thing in your marriage. Mort Fertel describes how counseling can often stir up more issues than it resolves, but pursuing connection can make a lot of issues disappear. After years and thousands of dollars spent in counseling, I agree. Counseling still has value, but pursuing connection has the best return on investment. Here are some strategies for connection:
- Talk Charge [Recommended Mort Fertel]
 - Call your spouse every day for just 60 seconds just to tell them something interesting that says (without using these words) “I’m thinking of you”. Share something you saw, read, experienced. Do NOT talk logistics, such as who is going to pick up the kids or what groceries are needed – nothing need-oriented, just pleasant and enjoyable.
- Touch Charge [Mort Fertel]
 - Touch your spouse in a meaningful way at least once per day – a hand on the shoulder or cheek, holding hands, a hug, a kiss (not a glancing peck), anything meaningful and intentional that says “I want to be connected”.
- Regular Date Nights. [Mort Fertel]
 - Mort Fertel recommends date night every week – the same night every week, with nothing allowed to preempt it. These are not watching movies, but doing things where you can talk and connect.
- Have Fun Together.
 - Look for things that both of you can enjoy together. Have fun. All work and no play destroys people and relationships.

Positive Sentiments, Strategies for a Better Marriage

- Memory Album Strategy[Brian Shrock]
 - Each partner keeps a memory album. In this album put cards, letters, pictures, pressed flowers, trip memorabilia, write your thoughts and feelings..., all positive memories from, with, or about your partner. Review your album at least every 6 months as a reminder of good times with and good things about your partner. This will help create the positive sentiment override that fuels a good marriage (see John Gottman's book).

What Can I Do? Strategies for a Better Marriage

- New Beginnings / Save My Marriage Seminar, by Family Dynamics
 - This is an excellent intensive seminar with great information, tools, and strategies useful in any stage of marriage. I have been to dozens of marriage seminars and classes, all of which were beneficial, but I found the New Beginnings Seminar especially effective. See www.familydynamics.com or www.savemy marriage.com .

What Can I Do? Strategies for a Better Marriage

- Love Dare [from the movie Fireproof]
 - This is a 40 day program with specific steps for each day. The Love Dare came out after the demise of my marriage, and after I had created my own mission for my marriage. So while I have not personally experienced or read the Love Dare, I'm confident that it is valuable and effective because it is a mission for connection and marriage, and I have experienced the effects of such a pursuit.

What Can I Do? Strategies for a Better Marriage

- Marriage Mission [Brian Shrock]
 - Create a personalized mission for your marriage. Write it down. Do it.
 - Here are some elements of the mission I created that worked for me and transformed me as I began to work it, and I'm confident would have worked on my former spouse had she not been involved in another relationship.
 - End all the “little wars” between us, even if I hadn't started them. This one came before my written mission.
 - Apologize in a meaningful way (not just saying you're really sorry) for things you've done that hurt your relationship. [Strategy from New Beginnings Seminar by Family Dynamics.
 - Say something affirming each day to your spouse.
 - (Continued)

What Can I Do? Strategies for a Better Marriage

- Marriage Mission (Continued)
 - Find a meaningful way to express appreciation and say thank you to your spouse.
 - Examples:
 - » I was grateful to my wife for her cooking, so I wrote and mailed her a card. I let her know she was great at both cooking and presentation, and offered her dinner at any restaurant of her choice, or one I chose if she preferred. (My choice was a fancy expensive restaurant).
 - » I was grateful that she washed the clothes, so I wrote a card acknowledging her efforts and my appreciation, and included gift cards to her favorite clothing stores.
 - A weekend trip for just the two of you at least once every 3 months. Get away and enjoy each other.
 - A longer bigger trip for just the two of you once per year.

Strategies: Put Your Spouse First

- What is the most important human in your life?
 - This should be your spouse. What?! Not your children?! That is correct: not your children, but your spouse. No one, other than God, should be more important than your spouse. Do not read this as “I should be the most important to my spouse”. Your job is to do *your* job, not to fix your spouse or to get them to do their job. If you want to hurt your marriage, put your children first. If you want to hurt your marriage, see your spouse as the one that needs fixed.
 - If you put children first, you teach them wrong. This shows them that they are most important and everything revolves around them. It also teaches them to be served rather than to serve. And it teaches them not to respect your spouse and to see them less as less important than you or themselves. When those children become adults, they will not suddenly start putting other people first and serving. They will look for people to serve them just like you did.
 - Everyday make some time, even 15 minutes, to spend with your spouse, *where children can see* and are NOT allowed to interrupt. This will help you connect and will provide security and assurance for your children.

Recommended Strategies

- Affirmation.
 - Even if you disagree with something, affirm the person and the feelings behind it. Example from Dr. Kevin Lehman: A little girl, who lives in an apartment wants a pony. Instead of stating the obvious that there's no place to keep a pony, that it's not in the budget, that it would be too much hassle, etc., you can say something like this: “Oh, wouldn't that be wonderful! Then you could ride your pony to school and tie it up at the bicycle rack. Then you and your friends could come out at recess and feed it sugar cubes...” Participate in the dream and affirm the feelings. That doesn't mean it will become reality. Enjoy the imagination rather than responding to it as a threat or discussing why it doesn't make sense. The time for reality comes later.
 - Affirm the person and their feelings, even if those feelings are not based on truth, reason, or reality.

Recommended Strategies

- Ask the question, “Does this help or hurt my relationship”
 - Talking bad about your spouse to others hurts your relationship. Trying to get someone to see your spouse as the bad guy not only hurts your relationship, but also makes you the bad guy. It also makes you look stupid for picking a bad spouse.
 - Punishing your spouse in some way when you don't get what you want, withholding something they need (including positive attention or sex), hurts your relationship and hurts you too.
 - Sarcasm (different than being facetious) is almost never appropriate. Sarcasm is meant to bite to lash, even when couched in a tease or joke, and that hurts everybody. Sarcasm example “Thank you very much!!!” when you mean the opposite.
 - Trying to hurt someone in anger is like trying to stab someone with double edged blade with no handle. You can't use it without cutting yourself.
 - Trying to make your spouse look bad to your kids hurts your kids too.
 - Do and say only what you can look yourself and your friends and your kids in the eyes later and feel ok about with them knowing all about what you did.

Recommended Resources

- Seminar: **New Beginnings** by Family Dynamics
- Movie: **Fireproof**
- Movie: **Facing the Giants**
 - Resolve to perform the Death Crawl if needed.
- Book: **Boundaries** by Cloud and Townsend
- Book/audio :**The Ten Second Kiss** by Dr. Ellen Kriedman
 - Also **Light Her Fire** or **Light His Fire** books/tapes.
- Book: **Marriage Fitness** by Mort Fertel
- Book: **The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work**, John Gottman.
- Book: **Passionate Marriage** by David Schnark
 - PG-13, not for the easily offended.
 - Practice the recommended 5-minute hug.